



OUT OF THE BOX:

RESEARCHING A DIVIDED COUNTRY

A group of undergraduate students from Purdue University's Department of Political Science and the Brian Lamb School of Communication attended the 2017 Presidential Inauguration and subsequent Women's March on Washington to research political divisions in America. For many of the students, this was their first experience with qualitative research.

A rush of screaming and cheering ripples through the crowd as Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States, walks up to the podium. While many are cheering on this new president and the platform on which he campaigned, others are more reserved, anxious about how their lives will change. This was the scene at the 58th Presidential Inauguration, the result of a unique and turbulent election cycle.

This election cycle suggested that America is very politically divided, with individual perceptions of the world differing drastically depending on their political affiliations. As political science students, we are interested in peoples' political behavior and political participation. This election, and a subsequent research trip which students from the Department of Political Science and the Brian Lamb School of Communication participated in, provided the unique opportunity for research on these topics.

To gain hands-on experience studying political behavior and political participation, nineteen students visited Washington, DC, during the 2017 inauguration. While visiting the site, the students engaged in qualitative research training. The inauguration was a unique venue to be introduced to the world of qualitative research. By conducting semi-structured interviews and participant observation, the students not only learned how to conduct qualitative research and collect original data, but also obtained real-world findings regarding the American political divide.

Theoretical Framework

Our research addresses the question of whether the United States is in the midst of a culture war. This

question derives from the work of Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope in the third and most recent edition of *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. Fiorina is a highly acclaimed political scientist with notable work relating to American politics. *Culture War* examines polarization within the American electorate using election and public opinion data. This analysis provided the theoretical framework to the qualitative study that took place in Washington, DC, during the weekend of the inauguration.

Fiorina (2010) defines "culture war" as "a displacement of the classic economic conflicts that animated twentieth-century politics in the advanced democracies by newly emergent moral and religious ones," leading to the creation of a "50/50 nation . . . made up of two big, separate voting blocks, with only a small number of swing voters in the middle" (p. 8). Fiorina explores the potential existence of a culture war by analyzing the 2004 and 2008 elections and public opinion data on two controversial social issues: abortion and gay marriage.

Based on the data, Fiorina concludes that there is *not* a culture war in the United States. On the contrary, he argues for a series of contributing factors leading citizens to *believe* in the presence of a culture war. Factors that could make the United States feel more divided than it actually is include a heavily fragmented media, politically active individuals who are divided, and confusing political positions that individuals have. Based on Fiorina's findings and the context of the 2016 presidential election campaign—which observers describe as contentious—the underlying research question for the project was: Is Fiorina's

argument about a lack of culture war consistent post the 2016 presidential election? Divided into four smaller research teams of four individuals, students collected data to explore this question in the field in Washington, DC, during the weekend of the 58th Presidential Inauguration.

Research Methods

To investigate, students conducted qualitative research using semi-structured interviews and participant observation. To prepare for the field research, students completed two workshop sessions prior to departure. These sessions included short lectures from Dr. Nadia Brown and Dr. Natasha Duncan about the nature of qualitative research and strategies for conducting interviews. Smaller teams then worked together to develop their own set of interview questions to pose while on the ground. Though these questions varied by group, they all were connected to the guiding research question regarding polarization in America. Some of the individual group questions included themes such as perceptions of the media in politics today, the tensions in familial or friend relationships due to differing beliefs, and perceptions of the “other side” in terms of Democrats versus Republicans, or vice versa. By the end of the workshops, students were equipped with a set of questions and strategies to use in DC.

While researching in Washington, students interviewed two main groups: the political elite and the general public. The political elite consists of politicians, media experts, political scientists, and others who would be considered experts on the subject. Among the political elite, students met with Indiana Senators Joe Donnelly and Todd Young. They also spoke with Brian Lamb, founder of C-SPAN. For the general public, students interviewed those in attendance at the inauguration—both protestors and supporters of the president-elect—individuals participating in the Women’s March on Washington, and other members of the public.

In conducting interviews, the students followed strict guidelines to reduce bias in the collected information. During the interviews, students did not disclose their own political beliefs or their thoughts on what they would find. Also, students let the responses of the subjects dictate the direction of the interview, but the same questions eventually were asked of each respondent.

Where participant observation is concerned, students were intentional in observing their surroundings, recording sounds and sights of the environment and

persons situated in this environment. Through this, students could observe and gain a better understanding of the political behaviors and polarization around them. After returning from the field, students worked in their groups to analyze all of the collected data. For the analysis, groups transcribed interviews and created codes to categorize the general themes that emerged from the data.

Qualitative research was a valuable method for this project because it allowed a broader range of perspectives on the issue and a richer understanding of Americans’ views on polarization. Through the interview and participant observation methods, students could gather information through speaking to individuals as well as through observation of the “natural setting” of the events taking place that weekend.

Field Research and Adapting to the Environment

Initially, the research team set out with one overarching question: Is the United States in the midst of a culture war? The question arose from the 2016 election season that the United States recently endured, and given this topic’s pervasiveness in the media, it seemed a better time than ever to reevaluate this idea.

Respondents on the first day of the trip alluded almost ubiquitously to a stark political divide in the United States. Given that most individuals interviewed were politically active, however, previous research suggests this finding is expected (Fiorina, 2010). Individuals who attended events such as the 2017 inauguration or Women’s March tended to be more politically involved than the average American. Fiorina suggests in *Culture War* that as one becomes increasingly politically involved, one also becomes more partisan and divided.

While on the ground, research teams adjusted their interview questions as this pattern of partisan division emerged. Accordingly, besides inquiring about whether persons perceived a division among Americans, researchers also asked why respondents felt there was there this perception. Ultimately, the questions were geared heavily toward the idea of a political divide in the United States, and subsequently, what factors could be responsible.

CONCLUSIONS

Upon returning to campus, students processed and analyzed the data collected during the research trip. They found a few common themes across most of the data. First, many respondents suggested that the

United States was more divided politically than it was prior to the election cycle. Second, a common factor blamed for this divide was large news networks, more generally, “the media.” Many respondents suggested that the media helped to make Americans more disparate politically by drawing attention to large divisions such as race or economic class. Many suggested that the United States would not be as divided politically if the media did not play such a large role in United States politics.

Finally, it is important to discuss some limitations to the research that the students conducted. The inauguration and Women’s March were highly publicized, and divisive events by their nature. This environment could have impacted responses that the students received. More specifically, these events could have made individuals feel more politically divided, which would have impacted the findings. Another consideration is the small sample of people interviewed, averaging 30 respondents per small group—about 150 in total—and a specific sample of people to whom the students had access. Many in DC for these events were politically active and had well-thought-out political opinions. In other words, they are political partisans who may not be representative of the general American public. Students expect the findings to remain similar with a larger sample of people, but this is not an assumption they wish to make without further research.

The inauguration research trip provided the students with an opportunity that not many receive. Not only did students get to witness perhaps the most important event of the year in the United States, but they also received valuable experience in conducting qualitative research. For many students, the research they conducted is just the beginning. Some are seeking to further expand on their research and have it published, while others have already presented their initial findings at events such as Purdue’s Undergraduate Research Symposium. The research trip was an important experience for these students, and the value of the research, along with the experience they all received, cannot be understated.

REFERENCE

Fiorina, M. P., Abrams, S. J., & Pope, J. C. (2010). *Culture war? The myth of a polarized America*. New York: Longman.

Feagler, L., Weaver, S., Clase, C., & Deach, M. (2017). Out of the box: Researching a divided country. *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*, 7, 89–91. <https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284316416>

Students



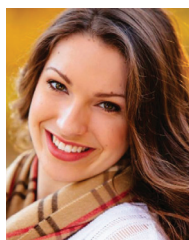
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